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SUBJECT: SOFIA GAY PRDE PARADE A QUALIFIED SUCCESS

11. (U) SUMMARY The second annual Rainbow Friendship parade hel on June 27 in downtown Sofia attracted over three hundred participants and avoided any violent incients or major anti-gay protests like those that arred last year's event. Eleven embassies, the Bulgarian Green Party and the Bulgarian Socialist Youth Organization supported the event. Security was tight, with a heavy police presence and private security hired by the event organizers. Though the event is still a new tradition, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues are still sensitive in Bulgaria, the success of this year's parade is a step forward in advancing community acceptance of differing sexual orientations. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The 2009 Rainbow Friendship gay pride parade was organized by the Bulgarian gay support organization Gemini, the Bilitis Resource Center for Bisexual Women and Lesbians, and the Bulgarian Activists Alliance. Several Greek gay groups also lent their support and participated in the rally. Three hundred people marched in the event, doubling 2008's total. A float playing music lead the peaceful procession from Sofia's National Palace of Culture to the Red House Center for Culture and Debate for a post-march reception. Though participants were boisterous, event organizers encouraged them not to be overly ostentatious or confrontational with potential anti-gay protesters. Careful planning helped assure the event was not marred by any incidents. Eleven embassies, the Bulgarian Green Party, and the Bulgarian Socialist Youth Organization supported the event. Ambassador McEldowney released a statement promoting tolerance and diversity in support of the event and several diplomatic missions made it clear that this event mattered through issuance of public statements, some of which were criticized in the press and by Bulgarian right wing politicians.

13. (U) Despite worries about violence or altercations, there were no significant counter-protests or harassment of the parade-goers. Bystanders whispered comments and a single group of Bulgarian youths shouted insults. Several Christian organizations appealed to Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov and City Hall in an open letter to ban the event. No government organization interfered or attempted to stop the march. On Sunday, June 21, one hundred theology students held a peaceful anti-homosexual march, carefully distancing themselves from groups advocating violence to prevent the Friendship Parade. This is in stark contrast to last year when eighty persons armed with clubs, stones and Molotov cocktails, gathered by the Bulgarian Nationalist Union, attempted to storm the gathering point. Police dispersed last year's violence quickly and law enforcement arrested some sixty people.

14. (U) Security at this year's event was lighter than in 2008, yet police forces remained vigilant. The city provided ample security to protect the marchers, but did not ring them with armored riot police like last year. In spite of lessened security, police rushed the event to avoid potential disruption; once organized, the parade was only twenty minutes long. Law enforcement cleared city streets on the parade's route and provided an adequate escort of security

personnel, ambulance and fire units. March organizers also hired approximately fifty to sixty private security people outfitted with helmets and truncheons for protection.

15. (U) COMMENT: Unlike other parts of Eastern Europe where these events have turned violent, the success of this year's parade in Bulgaria is notable. A few comments and whispers as the procession moved along the streets were the worst visible signs of anti-gay sentiment in a traditionally conservative country where only twenty years ago homosexuality was classified a mental disorder. Bulgarian society remains deeply homophobic and this year's event was more a measured exercise in civil society than a celebration of diversity. The fact that the parade proceeded peacefully is a good first step towards acceptance of EU social values.  
McEldowney